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ABSTRACT

Specific difficulties encountered when helping low-achieving students improve their college reading and study skills include pronunciation of new words, low vocabulary, inability to follow directions, spelling problems, and an inability to differentiate between main ideas and details. Some techniques that have been used at San Jose State College, California, to overcome these problems include analyzing in groups the pronunciation and meaning of student-selected new words; testing and correcting spelling in pairs; diagramming paragraph and article organization; following oral directions, such as machine operation; and analyzing creative writing in pairs. Also, the teacher must consider possible cultural differences, motivational problems, and fear of failure by the student when trying to help these low-achievers. A list of workbooks for reading improvement is given. (DE)

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GROUP TECHNIQUES FOR HELPING MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND OTHER LOW-ACHIEVING STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR COLLEGE READING AND STUDY SKILLS

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by

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Community colleges and other institutions who admit all high school graduates have serious problems in motivating and helping the low achieving, and frequently low potential college aspirant. By order of its Board of Trustees, San Jose State College admits as 4% of its freshman class students who do not meet its basic entrance requirements. They have, however, special skills or talents which admission officers feel will contribute to the college's overall standing. In the 1969 academic year, this group includes 400 Black and Mexican-American (Chicano) students under the Educational Opportunity Program. Although these students are carefully selected on the basis of recommendations from their high school teachers and members of their communities, many have basic language problems.

San Jose State College provides these students with two sources of aid for the problems they encounter in college. One is the Writing Center where a student can bring any paper which he is preparing or which has been returned to him by an instructor. In the Writing Center, he receives private tutoring with experienced composition teachers who discuss organizational skills and ways of improving his paper and correcting his errors. Each change recommended is explained to the student. If he has persistent problems, he is drilled on that specific skill. There is no limit to the time that he can spend in the Writing Center.

The second service to help the low achieving student is the College Reading Laboratory where he can work with well-trained graduate assistants on a specifically planned individualized program of reading improvement. The laboratory also offers a course for Mexican-American students who are selected by the EOP program director because they especially need help with reading. This class meets three days per week and each student earns three credits for completing the course. Grading is on a pass-fail basis.

The specific difficulties which have been encountered in teaching this special class and techniques for overcoming them are the subject of this paper.

Some of the most frequent difficulties which Mexican-American students face in reading include: pronunciation of new words, poor vocabulary, inability to follow directions, spelling problems and the inability to differentiate between main ideas and details. The teacher also faces problems in helping these students including their social differences, poor motivation, and fear of failure.

The techniques that we have developed for handling these problems in class and in individual conferences include the following:

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Pronunciation of New Words.

The class is encouraged to bring the new words they encounter for discussion of pronunciation as well as meaning. They are encouraged to remember the word in the context of the sentence. The class discusses each word and ex-

(To be discussed at IRA Seminar, May 1970)

ercises in dividing words into syllables, finding suffixes and prefixes, learning the basic roots and determining whether the vowel sound should be long or short are given. Then the word is looked up in a dictionary so that the student gets practice in this skill. The students are checked on their ability to use the basic rules for pronunciation by being asked to pronounce nonsense words.

For example, a student might bring the sentence "The culmination of the process is an organized scheme." The word culmination is written on the board and the student is asked to divide it into syllables-- cul-mi-nate-- according to the rules he has learned. He tries the long sound and the short sound for the i, then remembers the rule, "When in doubt, try the short sound." He checks the dictionary for the meaning and the correct pronunciation of the word. The other class members are encouraged to copy the words from the board as they are presented and check their dictionaries. It is stimulating for the students to try to stump the other class members and the teacher with new words.

Typically, Mexican-American students are shy about reciting in class and fear that they will make mistakes and others will laugh at them. However, in the vocabulary exercises, they can reduce their fears by previously preparing their words or consulting with the teacher in case of doubt and find the class encouragement supporting. The atmosphere in the class at the beginning of the semester is quite different from that at the end when nearly all of the students are proud to present and discuss their new words in class.

Homonyms and Spelling.

A second problem which poor readers frequently have is inability to discriminate homonyms and poor spelling. Students are encouraged to think of "mnemonic" devices to help them remember correct spellings, such as "There's always an end to a friend." The rule for doubling consonants to provide for the short sound is taught and practice in spelling pairs of words such as "shamed" and "shammed" or "bitter" and "biter" is given.

Students are encouraged to note trouble spots in spelling words such as "recommend" and tell how they go about remembering the spelling of the word. The word is written on the board and the "hard spots" underlined. Often the problem in spelling is related to the rules of word analysis which help to fix the correct spelling. It is important that the student also learn to pronounce the word correctly. If a Spanish-American student says "matematics", he is likely to spell it incorrectly too because in Spanish there is a close correspondence between spelling and pronunciation. Another technique we often use is to divide the class into pairs and have each student test his partner with 10 words from the list. Then they correct the spelling together and note the trouble points.

Differentiating Between Main Ideas and Details.

Training in differentiating between main ideas and details is given through group practice exercises. By first deciding on what the topic is of the paragraph and then deciding which sentence best states what the author's topic is, the class learns to differentiate main ideas from details. Also they practice drawing diagrams of the organization of a paragraph and relating these diagrams to the outline of an article which helps them find the structure and organizational patterns in writing.

Most of the Mexican-American students have been in low-track English classes and have very weak writing skills. Almost none of them have taken courses in speech so their organizational skills must be reinforced by as much practice of this kind as possible. A collection of well organized paragraphs is a valuable tool which teachers should develop. Some SRA materials can be used for this purpose too.

Following Instructions.

We use the SRA materials to give students practice in following oral instructions. The teacher must be alert to see that each student is doing his work exactly as he has been told to do it.

Practice exercises in following directions can be obtained from many sources. Interest can be generated by having students write their own paragraphs and then trading them with others to see how carefully the instructions were followed. Demonstrating the use of machines to students is another kind of practice in this skill.

Cultural Differences.

Another problem which the teacher faces is the psychological one of accepting the fact that these students are culturally different from the others she has taught. Reading all the literature she can about the Mexican-American can help her to become more aware of his assets and help her to give him a chance to display them. These students are very altruistic. Most of them are in college to help La Raza, (the race) and can be appealed to on this basis. A student who has been arrested on a stop-work project to help more Mexican-Americans get skilled jobs in the construction industry can be expected to study hard to help not only himself but others. Students voluntarily help other Mexican-Americans in their classes because their culture is supportive rather than competitive.

Motivation.

Problems of motivation arise when students are bored in class, are not included in planning for the class, or feel constantly ill-at-ease for fear of being called on to recite. Many of these Mexican-Americans have had poor attendance records in elementary and high school and college does not change the pattern. They are most willing to do what is interesting to them or what seems to them closely related to their goals for the future. Helping them in conferences to state their goals clearly and pointing out in class why this particular skill is necessary for doing good work in college helps to keep them coming to class. Having a flexible program, where students can come in to later sessions, helps to overcome excessive absences.

Chicanos will agree with you because it is the polite thing to do. Even though some of them are militant, they are basically very agreeable and will not argue with your position, even though they feel that it is wrong. They believe that everyone is entitled to his own beliefs, and they will not come to class simply because the teacher thinks it is important.

In the matter of grades, they cannot be pressured. They have gained entrance to college without having received high grades in school and many of them expect this preferred position to continue. If it does not, then they will blame those who misled them into coming to college or they will accept it as their fate.

Fear of Failure.

This problem, with its concomitant psychological burdens, is one which nearly all low-achieving students feel. Keeping class activities to a sort where all students have an opportunity to show themselves off in their best light is important in reducing this fear. Remembering to praise the value of each contribution without reducing the self-worth of the student whose answer is incomplete or incorrect is a technique whose value cannot be overestimated. Chicanos have had so many teachers frown when they spoke, because of their accents,

because their answers were frequently wrong, or because the teacher was racist, that they are very shy in answering in class. It takes skill and practice to get them to recite with relative ease. Giving them as much opportunity as possible structured toward success can help them to overcome these feelings.

Conclusion.

Students who are ill-prepared for college level work and the teachers who teach them face many problems when they meet each other in the reading classroom, but clear delineation of the goals of the class and a flexible approach to solutions can enable both students and teachers to meet the demands of the situation in an adequate manner. The Chicano can leave the class knowing he has improved a basic skill necessary to succeeding in his college career, and the teacher can feel satisfaction that he has helped the student reach his true potential.

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